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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 KUWAIT 003391

SIPDIS

STATE FOR NEA/ARPI AND INR - KIRSCH

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SUBJECT: KUWAITI RUMOR MILL ON OVERDRIVE REGARDING IMMINENT
AL-SABAH LEADERSHIP CHANGE

Classified By: Ambassador Richard LeBaron for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

1. (C) Summary: After two days of intense public speculation about a possible change of senior Kuwaiti leadership, post is unable to confirm persistent rumors that Kuwaiti Prime Minister Shaykh Sabah Al-Ahmad will be elevated to the post of Crown Prince or Amir. The rumors followed a September 25 article in a prominent Kuwait daily quoting a senior Kuwaiti ruling-family official who stated that important changes were forthcoming that would "herald a new era." Several rumor scenarios were circulating with the two most prominent promoting Shaykh Sabah Al-Ahmad to the position of Amir in the very near future. On September 26, a ruling family member working in the Prime Minister's office told Poloff that Shaykh Sabah would not seek to be elevated to either Crown Prince or Amir out of respect for the Amir and the Crown Prince. The official added that Shaykh Sabah was "already the de facto ruler" of the country. End Summary.

2. (C) On September 25, in a front page article in respected daily Al-Qabas, National Guard Chief Shaykh Salem Al-Ali Al-Sabah said the ruling family was in the process of announcing significant resolutions in the upcoming days and that the time for change had come. He continued, saying "it is a new phase for the ruling family, a phase long awaited by the people and will be in favor of the country and its stability." Shaykh Salem Al-Ali, who is the third highest ranking GOK official in order of protocol, further compared the ill-defined changes to the adoption of Kuwait's Constitution in 1962. Shaykh Salem said the September 25 return of the Amir from the U.S., where he underwent medical treatment, to Kuwait would signal the beginning of high-level family consultations. (Comment: A photograph of the Amir, upon his return to Kuwait, was printed in all major dailies and showed, for the first time, a tired and grey-haired Shaykh Jaber. End Comment.)

3. (SBU) News reports and Embassy contacts reported September 26 that the Al-Sabah ruling family planned a September 26 or 27 meeting of key family members, and rumors suggested that decisions made in this meeting could affect the very top positions in the GOK, to include the Amir and Crown Prince. Several scenarios were circulating but the following were the two most prominent:

4. (SBU) The first scenario: The Amir and Crown Prince step down due to health concerns, Prime Minister Shaykh Sabah Al-Ahmad becomes Amir and Foreign Minister Shaykh Dr. Mohammed Al-Sabah becomes the new Crown Prince. Interior Minister Shaykh Nawaf becomes the new Prime Minister and Energy Minister Ahmed Al-Fahd becomes the Foreign Minister.

5. (SBU) The second scenario: The changes would be made in phases beginning with the Amir appointing Prime Minister Shaykh Sabah Al-Ahmad as Crown Prince, after current Crown Prince Shaykh Saad Al-Abdullah Al-Salem Al-Sabah steps down. In the second phase, the Amir would step down and Shaykh Sabah Al-Ahmad would then become Amir. National Guard Deputy Chief Shaykh Mish'al Al-Ahmed Al-Jaber Al-Sabah would be expected to play a key role in the decision-making process for choosing the rest of the Cabinet. All high-level GOK reshuffling was expected to take place before the Parliament convenes on October 26.

6. (U) An Al-Qabas reporter following the story on the 26th told post that the Sabah family intends to give the younger generation the opportunity to advance to senior leadership positions including Foreign Minister Shaykh Dr. Mohammed Al-Sabah. (Note: FM Dr. Mohammed will be 49 on October 25th and Energy Minister Shaykh Ahmed Al-Fahd is 41. End Note.) The family, however, was expected to include in any new government the current Defense Minister Shaykh Jaber Al-Mubarak, from the Al-Hamad branch, to maintain balance between the Al-Jaber and Al-Salem branches. He also speculated that Kuwait might adopt a system of government similar to that in Jordan where the Amir appoints the Prime Minister from among qualified citizens.

7. (C) Poloff met September 26 with a ruling family member who works closely with the Prime Minister. The official categorically denied that Shaykh Sabah would even consider such a move, out of respect for the Amir, his brother, and

the Crown Prince. He added that Shaykh Sabah was "already the de facto ruler" of the country. Despite this denial, local dailies reported September 27 that the Sabah family would be meeting that day to discuss disagreements within the family. Reversing the story again, local daily Al-Seyassah reported on September 28 that the ruling family meeting was not held and noted that informed sources speculate that if it is held, there is nothing that warrants any changes in the senior posts as previously reported.

18. (C) Comment: Despite rumors appearing in relatively fringe media outlets such as Bahrain's Gulf Daily News and mainstream news sources such as AFP and Radio Sawa, it appears that there may not be any change in leadership at the moment. That Shaykh Salem Al-Ali, third most senior in the ruling family, would allow himself to be quoted in a front-page news article, however, indicates that at the very least, there are serious debates occurring within the ruling family over the future leadership of the country. Further clouding the picture is the fact that Crown Prince Shaykh Saad is scheduled to depart Kuwait on September 28 to the United Kingdom for a medical checkup.

19. (C) Comment Continued: Were it to occur now, a wholesale power change would likely energize the political system and would all but erase efforts by the National Assembly to grill Ministers during the upcoming Parliamentary session. It would certainly usher Kuwait into a period of more decisive decision-making, relative to that of the current Amir.
LeBaron